

# The Making of a Newfoundland Fisherman's Traditional Birch Broom

*Presented by*  
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Gillams, North Shore, Humber Arm  
Bay of Islands, Newfoundland



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The fishermen of Newfoundland traditionally did not buy brooms or mops to wash down their boats or fishing stages. Why would a fisherman pay money for a broom that would not last, when they could make one essentially for free on a bad weather day? A birch broom could be made from a birch stick fairly quickly, and once soaked in the salt water of the ocean, it was both soft and tough enough to clean the boat and stage after a successful day of catching and cleaning fish.

Starting with the materials, we will now take a step-by-step look at the making of a birch broom.

Materials: they are pretty basic! All that is required is one piece of birch, two to three inches in diameter by approximately four feet long, a pocket knife, an axe, and a piece of string about two feet long. The time it takes to make one birch broom (after obtaining the birch stick) is approximately four to five hours.

Choosing the birch stick is extremely important. Photos 1 to 3 show the area of thick birch on the North Shore of the Humber Arm of the Bay of Islands where Richard and Murray figured they would easily find a "good stick" (Photo 1).

***Photo 1***



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A birch with the above attributes is found with a trunk section of about four feet long that is relatively clear of branches, knots or other blemishes (Photo 2).

***Photo 2***



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The birch can be cut at any season of the year (including winter! Photo 3), but it must be used within a day or two of cutting before the sap dries out.

***Photo 3***



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Once fallen, the birch is cut to the desired length. It is important to cut it "square across" or trim it "square across" (Photo 4). This ensures that the bristles of the broom will be fair and even, not wedge shaped.

Now that the birch stick has been obtained, the work with the pocket knife begins. The rind is cut and peeled from the large end of the birch (Photo 5). The bark should be fully removed in this manner for a length of about two feet from the end of the broom.

*Photo 4*



*P17288*

*Photo 5*



*P17289*



After removing the bark, mark one ring about 7" - 8" from the end of the stick (Photo 6) and a second ring 1" - 1½" past the first.

**Photo 6**



These marks will be your guide when "peeling" the bristles of the broom. Starting at the extreme butt end and using a fairly sharp pocket knife, cut a small strand (much thinner than the end width of a popsicle stick but about the same width across as one) and peel it towards the first mark (Photo 7). These strands will peel off (or "run off") before reaching the mark. At first, these will run for an inch or more from the end of the stick - but do not despair! Continue this peeling process until the strands peel back to the ring. At this time, the future broom has "stopped running" and you are now ready to start making the actual bristles of the broom.

Continue to peel the strands while rotating the broom (Photo 8). This will assure that the bristles will make a circle formation in the finished product. This product is continued until (Photo 9) the entire trunk end of the birch has been peeled back.

*Photo 7*



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*Photo 8*



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*Photo 9*



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The last section around the core (indicated in Photo 10) will be short and rigid, and is simply sliced into as small a diameter as possible.

***Photo 10***



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At this point the broom is starting to become recognizable. The stick is now turned around. At a distance down the trunk from the second line that is about equal to the distance from the end of the stick to the second line (Photo 11), strands (like the ones peeled earlier) are

***Photo 11***



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taken from the new mark down the trunk and are pulled towards the end of the broom (Photo 12). The broom will "run" like before, but eventually the strands may be peeled to the second line without running off.

At this point, continue to proceed around the trunk of the stick, pulling strands down to the second line (Photo 13) until the size of a broom handle is obtained (in the case of a ~2" stick) or a large broom head has been obtained (in the case of a larger diameter ~3" or greater stick).



*Photo 12*

*P17296*

*Photo 13*



*P17297*



It may be necessary while pulling these strands down to the end of the broom to fold this portion of the strands back over the first section (Photo 14) to keep them out of the way while the broom is being finished. When the peeling of the strands - the broom's bristles - has been done, all of that bristles are temporarily tied back and are tapped securely into place at the top of the broom head (Photo 15).

*Photo 14*



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*Photo 15*



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The order of the remaining steps do not have to be followed as given, and we have often done one thing before the other from here to completion of the broom, having reached the end of forming the broom's bristles.

The broom may now be permanently tied very tightly with a piece of string, thick twine, or whatever string is available (Photo 16)

*Photo 16*



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A trawl sud line (the type of line that connects the hooks to the main trawl line) is preferred. It is important to make several passes of the line around the bristles, in a location on the broom head where slipping would be minimal. After this is done the bristles of the broom can be trimmed to the same length (if desired) using a sharp pocket knife.

The excess wood must be chopped away from the trunk to produce a comfortable broom handle. This can be done with a small axe (Photo 17). (Note that this broom was only temporarily tied and the string came loose; that is okay - the bristles can be folded back, tapped into place and tied tightly later.)

The handle can be chopped in a way to eliminate some of the crook in the handle, in the event that the stick is not straight (Photo 18). Care should be taken to avoid splitting large portions or changing the direction of the wood grains - both of which may cause the wood to splinter.



*Photo 17*



*P17301*

*Photo 18*



*P17302*

Using a sharp pocket knife, trim the handle to the desired size and smoothness (Photos 19 and 20). It is not necessary to sand the handle or otherwise make it very smooth. It is enough to make the handle smooth and small enough to avoid splinters and/or extremely rough areas.

After ensuring that your broom is permanently tied tightly, to give your broom an even shape "flare it" by holding it bristles-end-up and press down on the outer edge of the bristles in a motion away from the centre of the broom (Photo 21). This will give your broom an even shape which it will keep.

*Photo 19*



*P17303*

*Photo 20*



*P17304*



*Photo 21*



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With your own broom now complete (Photo 22), you can clean up the mess that you just made while creating the broom!

If you ever get a chance, try to see one of these brooms used by a fisherman at François, Grey River or some small Fortune Bay community. Or, better still, make a broom and try it out for yourself!

For best results, wet them well before using. Remember: the place for these birch brooms was on the fishing boats and stages, not the living room at home!

Murray and Richard Park  
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*Photo 22*



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